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HONOLULU ADVERTISER (HAWAII)
24 July 1980

U.S. aide sees no early end to occupation of Afghanistan

By Mark Matsunaga
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Although Soviets troops are finding Afghanistan a tough nut to crack, don't expect them to pull out anytime soon, a State Department intelligence officer said here yesterday.

Paul K. Cook, 55, special assistant to the director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, addressed some 40 members of the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council.

He has spent the past 29 years in the State Department as an expert on Soviet affairs, including several years as first secretary (political) at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. He travels frequently to the Soviet Union and now directs research and intelligence on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan on Dec. 27 for a variety of reasons, Cook said. He added, however, that the idea that the invasion was prompted by fear of Islamic fundamentalism spilling over into Russia's Muslim population is "highly overrated as far as the Soviets are concerned."

How well are the invaders doing?

"It should come as no surprise to readers and viewers of Western media that the answer is, not well at all," Cook said. "It is evident that Moscow miscalculated on at least two counts when they took the decision to invade."

"One was the extent of the opposition its forces plus those of its Afghan clients would encounter, and two was the severity of reactions by third powers — in the U.N., the Islamic Conference, the United States, the Olympics and so forth."

"Close examination of the evidence suggests that the Soviet operation began to go bad at the outset," he said.

For example, Cook said, reservists from central Asia comprised half of the initial Soviet invasion force. Under Soviet law, he said, they can be held on active duty for only 90 days unless a state of national emergency is declared. That wasn't done, so after 90 days the reservists went home.

"The effectiveness of the Soviet fighting force diminished appreciably," Cook said.

While the reservists have been replaced by regular units, Cook said Soviet casualties are numbering about 200 a week, about a third of those killed.

Initially, Soviet units were equipped with surface-to-air missiles and other hardware necessary in a NATO-style war.

on the plains of Europe, he added.

"Now Soviet units are being belatedly restricted to fight a counterinsurgency war."

"Today, the Soviets command all of the major cities and towns in Afghanistan and the relatively few highways that exist — at least during the daylight hours," he continued. "Nighttime is a different matter."

"It's a very bitter war. The countryside, except when the Soviets are there in numbers, remains in the hands of the various tribes and religious groups whose combat capabilities remain strong and may in fact be increasing."

The Soviets are deeply enmeshed in Afghanistan, exercising almost complete control in government, with 80,000 troops "in country" and another 25,000 across the border.

Cook discounted Soviet and Afghan statements that Soviet troops will remain there for only a short time.

"There is overwhelming evidence that Moscow is planning a prolonged occupation," he said. "The movement of additional forces to the Afghan border recently indicates that the Soviets plan to augment them in the near future, perhaps

after the Olympics.

"Their decision, evidently, to mount a large-scale counterinsurgency operation suggests they are determined to wipe out the nationalist resistance. Given the history of the Afghan-Soviet confrontation to date, I think this portends a long and bloody struggle."

Among the uncertainties Cook and his fellow Soviet-watchers in the U.S. intelligence have to deal with are the U.S. presidential election this fall and the succession at the Kremlin.

"Odds are, our doctors tell us, that (Soviet premier Leonid) Brezhnev will not survive the coming winter," Cook said.

Cook closed by saying, "While the Soviets are not 10 feet tall, neither are they only 4 feet tall. In reality, the average Soviet soldier or sailor is about 5-foot-6, very tough and growing."

"We must renew our commitment to rebuilding our nation's basic military and economic strength."

"At the risk of being accused of being Pollyannish, after one-third of a century of experience with things Soviet, I believe that with an appropriate mix of wisdom and common sense, we shall prevail."



Cook